Speaking for the Land: Language Studies for Sustainable Futures

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Notes:

The relationship between land and language is very deep, and many examples of this connection can be found in history, from Pāṇini to Suniti Kumar Chatterji. However, under colonial rule, George Abraham Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India marked the first systematic effort to chart the relationship between languages and territorial space. In the same period, not only languages but also land (the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India, 1802), minerals (the Geological Survey of India, 1851), and people or "races" (the Ethnographic Survey of India) were surveyed. These surveys were carried out to support colonial extraction and exploitation for the benefit of the West. After independence, the situation changed in form but not in principle. Extraction and exploitation continue, now mainly to support the interests of large corporations.

The Linguistic Survey of India, which formally began in 1894 and was completed in 1928, provides grammatical sketches of Indian languages along with their geographical distributions. The survey played a crucial role in territorialising sub-national identities. It was primarily undertaken for administrative and political purposes, as part of the process of consolidating the idea of the Indian nation and the state.

During this long phase of administrative and political development, the study of language in the Indian context changed significantly. New tools and methods were developed to define a speech practice as a "language" by turning it into an object of scientific enquiry and an abstract system of knowledge. Language came to be understood as a system made up of hierarchically organised subsystems such as phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. This formal and often mathematical approach focused mainly on how language functions as a system. Greater attention was given to *langue* rather than *parole*, and to *competence* rather than *performance*. Even when some studies addressed *parole* or *performance*, they largely remained silent about the links between language and issues such as land or migration. In most cases, the main aim was to archive linguistic knowledge in the form of accessible data. As a result,

language was increasingly reduced to an object of scientific investigation, detached from its social and historical contexts.

This approach to the study of language further shifted its focus towards modelling cognitive patterns through computational and statistical methods, while largely ignoring the fact that language is a lived practice. One visible outcome of this shift is the emergence of forms of life that we now recognise as artificial intelligence. In the process, language came to be treated less as a social and cultural practice and more as a technical object. What is often forgotten is that language does not survive through protection and preservation, but through promotion and celebration in everyday life. An excessive emphasis on archiving has reduced language to an accessible but lifeless entity, much like an organ preserved in formaldehyde. Under the name of preservation, languages are increasingly confined to dictionaries, grammars, and primers.

We learned to ask questions about phonemes, morphemes, phrases, and even statistical measures such as Levenshtein distances, but we failed to ask why the growing number of dams and reserve forests, or the expansion of roads and railway lines, leads to a gradual erosion of linguistic sustenance. As a result, the problem of linguistic sustainability remains unresolved. This continues to be the case despite increasing budgetary allocations for the promotion of lesser-known and endangered languages.

We often ignore the fact that a language's sound system and meanings are rooted in specific historical and geographical contexts. When communities are forcibly removed from their natural habitats, their indigenous speech practices are often affected. This happens because new patterns of contact and convergence emerge in unfamiliar environments.

Recent developments in India show how vulnerable languages become when communities are displaced from their natural habitats. Mining projects in Singrauli, Deucha Pachami, and Hasdeo, the dam project at Thurga, the floating solar project at Panchet, and the expansion of reserved forest areas across India are only a few such examples. These projects are continuously threatening the linguistic sustenance of smaller communities. Even a little attention is enough to hear the voices of the people who are suffering.

Mining activities in Singrauli, Madhya Pradesh, have had a detrimental impact on the Gond language, primarily through the displacement of indigenous communities, destruction of their traditional habitats, and forced cultural assimilation into a predominantly Hindi-speaking industrial environment. As one of India's major coal hubs, the rapid expansion of opencast mining and industrialization has severely eroded the socio-cultural, economic, and linguistic landscape of the Gond tribe.

Deforestation in the Hasdeo Arand region, driven by coal mining, has caused severe disruptions to the cultural and social fabric of the local tribal communities (primarily Gond and Oraon), which inherently threatens their indigenous languages and oral traditions. The destruction of the forest directly impacts the context in which these languages are spoken, lived, and passed down.

The Turga Pumped Storage Project (TPSP) in Ajodhya Pahar threatens the indigenous Santal community, their culture, and their language, Santali, by potentially displacing them, destroying traditional, sacred sites like Marang Buru, and disrupting their forest-dependent lifestyle. The project risks accelerating the loss of local cultural identity, which is intricately linked to the land.

The development of Haldia port, particularly the deepening of the navigation channel in the Hooghly estuary to accommodate large ships, has directly accelerated the destruction of Ghoramara Island by altering river hydrology and intensifying coastal erosion. Increased tidal energy, ship-generated waves, and altered sediment flow have led to significant land loss, transforming Ghoramara into a rapidly shrinking, vulnerable island. This leads to the immature death of the canal passing through the Sumatinagar of Sagardwip. The crab hunting people living nearby the canal lost their earnings and were displaced to distant places. This causes erosions in their speech behaviours.

The linguistic sustainability of a community is always related to its ecological niche. An ecological niche refers to the specific role and position a species occupies within an ecosystem. It describes how the species survives, reproduces, and interacts with both living and non-living

elements of its environment. This includes the habitat it lives in, its means of subsistence, its use of resources, and its interactions with other organisms.

The Upanishadic idea of "anna-brahma" sees food as sacred and central to life. From this view, "lokālaya" is not just a physical piece of land. It is the place where people live, work, and earn their livelihood. It is also the space where they experience life in its fullness.
People extend themselves beyond the limited boundaries of land by forming deep connections with their surroundings. They relate to local plants, water sources, insects, animals, and other forms of existence. Through these relationships, they feel connected to a larger, cosmic order.

These experiences are preserved in language. They appear in stories, myths, rituals, and everyday beliefs. Such linguistic expressions help people understand who they are and where they belong. In this way, language becomes a means of recognizing and sustaining their bond with the land, with the "lokālaya".

The constitutional provisions related to land protection are closely connected to linguistic sustenance. The Fifth[1] and Sixth[2] Schedules recognize that many communities live through collective relations with land, forests, and local resources. When these relations are protected, everyday language practices tied to work, ecology, and ritual can continue. Article 21, which includes the "protection of life and personal liberty", indirectly supports the individual right to "jal, jangal, and jamin" which is central to the issue of linguistic sustenance. Displacement caused by mining, dams, or development projects breaks these relations. When communities are removed from their land, their ecological vocabulary, oral traditions, and modes of communication begin to weaken. Although Article 300A[3] provides protection against arbitrary land acquisition, it often fails to prevent large-scale displacement. As a result, constitutional safeguards exist in principle, but their weak implementation leads to the erosion of linguistic sustenance along with the loss of land.

[1] Provisions as to the Administration and Control of Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes. – Fifth schedule, Article 244(1).
[2] Provisions as to the Administration of Tribal Areas in [the States of
Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram] – Sixth schedule, [Articles 244(2) and 275(1)]
[3] Persons not to be deprived of property save by authority of law. – Indian Constitution, Article 300A

Therefore, government projects on language documentation and linguistic analysis are not enough by themselves. National policies that promote mother-tongue–based education are also important, but they remain limited in their impact. Similarly, the demand for inclusion of languages in the Eighth Schedule addresses recognition, not survival. Hopefully, one day we will understand, linguistic sustenance depends on more than scripts, textbooks, or official status or language technology.

Languages live in everyday practices tied to land, forests, mountains, and rivers. They grow through farming, fishing, foraging, rituals, and local knowledge systems. When these ecological and territorial relations are disrupted, languages lose their functional ground. Without protecting the spaces in which languages are used and transmitted, policies remain symbolic. To truly sustain languages, linguistic problems must be understood and addressed through the lived landscapes that communities inhabit.